

Post Practice Improvement

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Several years ago, I decided to teach myself how to play the piano. At first, my fingers couldn't play for very long, and they often struck the wrong keys. But as I continued to practice, I was able to press the right keys and play for longer periods of time. Sometimes on the weekend I would play for 6-8 hours almost non-stop! But during my training, I noticed a very important rule, and I would like to share it with you, as explained by Chuan C. Chang in "Fundamentals of Piano Practice" (available for free online; his emphasis):

There is only a specific amount of improvement you can expect during practice at one sitting, because there are two major ways in which you improve. The first one is the obvious improvement that comes from learning the notes and motions, resulting in immediate improvement. This occurs for passages for which you already have the technique to play. ***The second one is called post practice improvement (PPI) that results from physiological changes as you acquire new technique.*** This is a slow process of change that occurs over weeks or months because it requires the growth of nerve and muscle cells.

Therefore, as you practice, try to gauge your progress so that you can quit and go to something else as soon as a point of diminishing returns is reached, usually in less than 10 minutes. ***Like magic, your technique will keep improving by itself for at least several days after a good practice.*** Therefore, if you had done everything right, then, the next day, you should discover that you can now play better. If this happens for just one day, the effect is not that big. However, the cumulative effect of this occurring over months or years can be huge.

It is usually more profitable to practice several things at one sitting and let them all improve simultaneously (while you are not practicing!), than working too hard on one thing.

Just like runners condition for marathons, pianists must also condition their finger muscles and enhance their techniques by playing relaxed. Likewise, language learners need conditioning, but we are always studying - there are always more flash cards to learn, journal entries to write, audio and video files to use for input! However, I would like you to also take breaks from your language learning. You may not be able to afford taking a long break, but the mind needs time for things to sink in.

I recently returned from a 9-month break from Russian. During those 9 months I did NOTHING to improve my Russian. The only thing I did was read a few emails in Russian from my friends; I responded to them in English. Yet after resuming my studies, the topics I struggled with a year ago are suddenly much easier to understand. That break from studying gave my mind some time to unconsciously sort out the grammar so that now I even wonder why I didn't understand it then.

:) Everything is so much clearer now.

I'm not saying that you need a 9-month break from your target language. The length of your break will depend entirely on you and what your mind needs. But you should definitely consider taking breaks from time to time to give your brain time to internalize the new information. And, hopefully, when you return from your vacation from language learning, you will notice that you've improved! :)